

*Like God*  
**Kissed**  
*you on the throat*

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By Jeannie Mellinger



In elementary school, George Bang's biggest disappointment was his mother's refusal to be a stage mother. "She wasn't buying it," he smiles. "She had better things to do." Growing up in New Providence, NJ, just thirty miles from New York City, young George could feel the magnetic heat of the footlights and the distant roar of the crowd. "I wanted to take dance classes and go to New York, but she was busy." He shakes his head. "It might have helped, actually. I was always so self-conscious dancing."

But it was really his voice that got George noticed. He started singing in school and church when he was just six-years-old. "I had a tremendous boy soprano voice and did lots of singing. But it was not until high school that I realized that my voice was, well, really good. I got the part of Billy Bigelow in *Carousel* – it's a huge role and it terrifies me to think about that now. I mean, it goes up to high G for days."

After high school, George headed for Princeton, NJ to attend Westminster Choir College. "I wanted to become a choral conductor – and actually that's still something I'm very interested in." There were many opportunities for performance at Westminster and by his sophomore year, George was on stage with the New York Philharmonic singing the part of Pontius Pilate in the St. John Passion by J. S. Bach. "I was just 19 years old," George says, "making my New York debut. I guess I was a kind of prodigy."

After this, George was advised to go to an institution where there was more of a performance concentration. He transferred to the Manhattan School of Music in New York. "I did a lot of performing there," says George. "A number of operas, many other things. It was a terrific place – a true music conservatory."

After graduation, George did a number of gigs around New York and then at age 25, applied for and received a grant from the Rotary Foundation to go to Munich. "Most of the professional singing I did was in Europe. I was the choral director of the American church in Munich and sang with the radio orchestra there. I did a number of solo things. Lots of concerts. I sang in the Sankt Michaelskirche – this big, gorgeous Baroque church. I was almost the house soloist there. I learned a tremendous amount."

George settled into life in Europe. Paris-based Agentur Hilbert took on the promotion of his career. He and his wife, pianist Linda Bang did many Lieder concerts together. Their first child, Dan, was born in Munich. In addition to the choral and solo work, George was even an extra in a few movies. "One of them was a sort of war movie," he says. "I can't remember the title. But if you look real hard, there's a glimpse of me dressed in an army uniform walking in the background carrying a briefcase."

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He picked up German quite easily, possibly because of his German grandmother, who spoke to George in her native tongue when he was a child. "I love Munich," he says. "If you could plop me down there with an adequate income and a decent apartment, I would move there yesterday."

Everything was falling into place for George. He was living his dream – a happy, growing family with a wife who shared his passion and talent for music, a city he loved, a promising career. He was singing under the baton of the great conductors of his generation. And then it all came to an abrupt end.

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"It was 1981," George remembers. "I was performing a lot. It was a really crazy time. I was so busy. I was in *Carmen*. I sang in Vienna for a couple of months. Then I was in the chorus of the famous Wagner festival at Bayreuth and I got a very bad case of bronchitis. But there are no sick days for choristers. And me, being the type of person I am, I didn't say I

couldn't do it, which I should have done.

"I headed off to Switzerland where I was engaged for three operas. The first one was sort of a buffo role. The second was a small role, but the third one was understudying Eugene Onegin, a very big part. I was aware that I had some problems, but the first role didn't reveal that much because it was mostly acting and dancing. But I knew that my voice wasn't right. I had a few days before the next set of rehearsals started. And I thought, 'let's pull out the old standard repertoire and see how we're doing.' It didn't take me thirty minutes to know that I was not going to get any kind of job singing the way I was singing. I didn't have the high notes. I didn't have the vocal control that I was used to."

George was devastated. He had a talented agent who had been successfully bringing him along. He likens his position then in the three-tiered German opera system to being in Triple-A ball, ready to move up to the next level. "I realized I was just not going to be able to do it. I was crushed. I had all these auditions set up. I'd bought my train tickets and everything. My plan had been to take a month off and just audition. And now, suddenly, singing the way I was, I was not going to be able to compete. So I cut my hair and came back to New Jersey and got a real job."

Of course, it wasn't that simple and the transition was not that easy. George's father, a successful businessman, encouraged him to go into sales. "I've been in sales and marketing ever since and not terribly happy about it. If I'd been a single guy, I probably would have gone back to school for a Master's in music history. I love teaching, but I didn't see any options at the time. We had a son, Dan, and soon our daughter Hillary came along. And I wanted to buy a house and do that whole middle-class thing. When we were in Germany we were so poor it was ridiculous. This was real, actual poverty. We'd make a pot of cabbage soup and live off of it for a week. We were so excited when someone gave us a tiny little black-and-white TV. We didn't even have a coffee pot."

The romance of living in a garret overlooking the charming cobblestone streets of a photogenic European city,



*George Bang and therapist Leda Scarce at work at Duke Voice Care Center*

eating cabbage soup for art's sake definitely loses its luster in the face of a newborn. "It's like the whole story from *Carousel* – in the soliloquy," George says. "'You can have fun with a son, but you've got to be a father to a girl.' It was hard, though. I loved the theatre. I loved everything about it. There's an expression in German – instead of 'stagestruck' they say you 'smell stage air.' The fact is, you can set me down blindfolded on a stage anywhere and I would know that's where I was because a stage smells like nothing else in the world."

He pauses, musing. "I might have tried to re-train as an actor because I actually enjoyed the acting side even more than the singing. But I just could not do that. I wasn't independently wealthy. If I'm taking out time to re-tool, what happens to the family?"

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Fast forward to April 27, 2008. George attends World Voice Day at Meymandi Concert Hall, where the North Carolina Symphony and Duke Voice Care Center

are collaborating on an afternoon of information and presentations devoted to the voice and vocal health.

"I had thought about trying to learn something about my vocal problems before. My son in New York reminded me that medicine has progressed a long way since then. He encouraged me to look into it. This was about four years ago. I did investigate, but I didn't really understand the program and I was seeing ka-ching ka-ching – dollar bills flashing before my eyes.

"But when I heard about Duke World Voice Day, I thought, what the heck, I'll just go see what I can find out. I talked to Leda Scarce and she told me I would probably be covered by insurance. So I thought, great! Where do I sign up?"

Leda Scarce, Duke Voice Care Center Clinical Coordinator / Speech Language Pathologist and Professional/Singing Voice Specialist, is uniquely qualified to advise patients like George. With degrees in Voice Performance from Indiana University, she has performed as leading soprano and soloist with opera companies, orchestras

and music festivals across the United States and has been a voice teacher for over twenty years. Her understanding of the human voice is scientific, professional, and also deeply personal.

"George's case is very interesting," Leda says. "Years ago, he saw an Ear, Nose and Throat Specialist in New York who told him that he had a paralysis of the 'small muscle' of the larynx. This is not too illuminating since all those muscles are small! This was in the '80s, before the diagnostic equipment we use today was available and so accurate diagnosis was much more difficult."

George's physician at the Voice Care Center is Dr. Seth Cohen. With a fellowship in laryngology and care of the professional voice to his credit, Dr. Cohen has a personal understanding of vocal athletes like George and how critical it is to maintain vocal health. "We have a much better understanding of the function and anatomy of the vocal cords and voice production than we did back when George first developed his problems," says Dr. Cohen. "We have new diagnostic

